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**FORT SMITH BUSINESSMAN HAS AWARD-WINNING ROLE  
IN NORTHSIDE ACADEMY**

FORT SMITH, Ark. – There were no red carpets, TV cameras or celebrity interviews when Rich Stankevich received an “academy award,” but the Fort Smith businessman didn’t miss the media frenzy.

He says he was both honored and surprised by the Exemplary Partnership Award he was given by the National Career Academy Coalition at its recent conference in Santa Fe, N.M.

The award was for Stankevich’s supporting role in the career academies – especially the Northside Business Academy – at Northside High School in Fort Smith.

A career academy is a small learning community that links a group of high school students with the same teachers for two to four years. Each academy focuses on a broad career cluster – such as architecture and construction or business, management and administration. It integrates career exploration and planning with academic

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subjects. For an academy to succeed, it needs the cooperation and involvement of the local business community.

That's where Stankevich enters the picture. Before moving to Fort Smith with Constitution State Services, a division of St. Paul Travelers, Stankevich was involved with a financial career academy in a large school district in Orlando, Fla. From the beginning, Stankevich was sold on the idea of the career academies.

"It's just a golden opportunity," Stankevich says of the academies in that they give students a taste of what it would be like to have a career in a specific area.

"It's better to experience that in high school," he says, rather than spending a lot of money on a college degree in a field they later discover they don't enjoy.

Stankevich arrived in Fort Smith in time to get in on the planning stage of the Northside academies. He jumped in with a clear vision of what the academies could be, Cathy Williams of Northside, who nominated him for the academy award, says.

Besides serving on the advisory board, Stankevich designed an employer workshop so students could meet with employers one-on-one and in small groups. The workshop featured interviews with a variety of employers, who discussed the different kinds of careers available in business.

Stankevich has arranged student tours of his office, held job-shadowing events and encouraged his staff to help with mock interviews and to speak in the academies. He also has helped with grant opportunities available through his company, which handles all the workers compensation claims for Beverly Enterprises.

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“I’m there as a resource for them,” Stankevich says.

He’s the first to admit that he gets a lot of personal satisfaction from his role.

“These kids are energized by the focus and the concern and care everyone is giving them. . . . It’s just fun to watch these kids succeed,” he says.

Stankevich also sees the time he spends with the career academies as a business investment. He says the Fort Smith schools need to produce a product all the local businesses and industries can use – an educated workforce. To ensure that outcome, the business community should be involved in the education process.

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